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ABSTRACT

This paper provides 11 steps on how to build a strong journalism program in a small high school. The categories discussed include: what is meant by a strong program; particular problems of small schools; additional problems affecting schools regardless of size; the advisor; the program; the staff; facilities and equipment; work environment; publications; money; and flexibility. The paper suggests that the publications course ideally should be 1-year long and that students not be permitted to drop at the semester. (MG)

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HOW TO BUILD A STRONG JOURNALISM PROGRAM IN A SMALL SCHOOL

by

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CS 212 568

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HOW TO BUILD A STRONG JOURNALISM PROGRAM IN A SMALL SCHOOL by Ivan Ford

I. What is meant by a strong program? By success?
   A. Consistently performing a vital service?
   B. Really training kids in solid journalistic techniques? (Having ex-students going into the field?)
   C. Having good and sufficient equipment and facilities?
   D. Accumulating power? (Being strong enough to make a difference, to get scheduling benefits, to keep the administration from tampering with the program or the publications?)
   E. Enjoying widespread respect?
   F. Winning awards? (Individual student, adviser, staff)
   G. Achieving other kinds of prestige and recognition? (Trying to be the premier activity in the school? Sports, in almost all public schools at least, will always be first.)

II. Particular problems of small schools
   A. Untrained advisers; disinterested advisers; adviser turnover (Advisers generally have other non-journalism-related duties and classes.)
   B. Competition for top students - with other classes, activities, jobs (College prep curriculums or endorsements and weighted grading systems can cause problems, too.)
   C. Small staffs; inadequate talent some years; over-dependence on one or two students with a lack of capable, or adequately trained, back-ups
   D. Inadequate facilities (and/or equipment)
   E. Administrative turnover
   F. Reluctance of administration to work toward offering a full program (including beginning journalism and perhaps photography)

III. Additional problems affecting schools regardless of size
   A. Scheduling problems
      1. Desire in some schools to make the publications totally extra-curricular
      2. Problems with the amount and type of academic credit offered
   B. Inadequate provision for funding of the publications

IV. The adviser
   A. Is the most important person in building a strong program. Must provide continuity from year to year
   B. Have separate newspaper and yearbook advisers if possible. It's very hard, especially in a small school, for one person to do a top-level job with both publications over any length of time. Both advisers should be dedicated to common goals and willing to work effectively with each other.
   C. Some qualities of a good adviser:
      1. Knowledgeable (and up-to-date)
      2. Interested
      3. Hard working. Can direct students but will also assist them as necessary. Willing to put in long hours if the situation demands. Highly motivated
      4. Can effectively manage and/or delegate authority. Can organize well. Can work well with students, fellow teachers, administrators and other groups

V. The program
   A. Should be curricular vs. extra-curricular, although, obviously, much work will still have to be done after school. Writing, photography and artwork from non-class members may be encouraged and used but avoid being too dependent on this material. Non-class members are often not adequately trained, and their work may reflect this deficiency. Also, there is generally no way to insure that the material will be turned in.

B. A beginning journalism class, open to everyone, should be offered. The class should be designed primarily for freshmen. Talented eighth graders should be recruited during the second semester to try to insure that many of them will be part of the following year's J I class. J I should be a one semester course, preferably offered first semester. This allows the better J I students to join J II at semester time if their doing so is necessary to bolster the publications class. (As a rule, it's better not to admit J I pupils to J II early to reduce the likelihood of "journalistic burnout" later on in their high school careers.)

C. The publications class should regularly be open to sophomores, juniors and seniors; all students should have the instructor's permission to enroll or to repeat the class a following year. (Pupils should be able to take the class as many as three years, three and a half if they start in J II as freshmen.) Offer English credit if possible, if not for all three years at least for one. (If English credit is offered for only one year, general elective credit can be given the other two.)

VI. The Staff

A. Is essentially all recruited. Be sure to look for the whole range of abilities needed (leadership, writing, art and design, computer skills, photography, sales). Do not admit anyone who is obviously not satisfactorily motivated or who doesn't appear to have an aptitude that can be used to help the publications. "Warm bodies" who produce only occasionally, whose work is generally substandard, who are not cooperative and who complain all the time take much more away from the program than they add. Staffs are much better off being smaller-sized.

B. Good female candidates are usually in much greater abundance than are good male ones. Yet to avoid stereotyping the journalism program and to improve the work atmosphere, it's best to have at least a certain number of boys in the class if possible. This number should be a minimum of one-fourth and preferably one-third of the class's total enrollment. But under no circumstances should "unqualified" boys be admitted just to give better male representation.

C. Editors should be selected by the adviser, probably with staff input. Because of the responsibilities connected with their jobs, editors should work almost exclusively on their own publication unless the class size is very small and both newspaper and yearbook are being done that hour. The rest of the class should be involved at least minimally in as many facets of work on both publications as possible or desirable. Following this practice is educational for students and helps protect against being stuck in situations in which only one person knows how to do something and that person is gone.

D. Whenever possible, next year's editors should work closely with the present ones in sort of an apprenticeship program. Next year's editors should attend a good summer workshop, too.

E. Don't be afraid to make capable, motivated sophomores editors if there are no junior or senior candidates of acceptable quality. Sophomores will struggle, but if they don't burn out and they stay with the program can provide outstanding stability and leadership over a longer period of time.

F. Students naturally gravitate to winners, even if hard work (within reason) is involved.

G. Perks help attract and keep kids. They include:
   1. Competitions
   2. Trips (#1 and #2 also have learning value and can
   3. Awards banquet definitely help improve program quality)
   4. Scholarships
   5. Even little things, like celebrating birthdays

VII. The facilities and equipment
- A. Have some place to call home. (Set up some sort of mailbox system for staffers.)
- B. 35mm cameras and accessories are definitely desirable. So is a darkroom, even if it is improvised.
- C. Virtually all schools are really getting into computers these days, and desktop publishing is definitely becoming "the thing" for scholastic publications. Getting a computer with a hard drive set up with Aldus PageMaker may not be that hard to pull off. It's best if the journalism program has at least one unit of its own but sharing with other departments and personnel may be necessary in some situations. Access to a laser printer is also necessary; many schools have, or will soon get, one or more of these.

VIII. The work environment
- A. Most students perform best in non-threatening, warm situations.
- B. If a good staff has been assembled, honesty is the best policy in dealing with its members. If, however, there are a number of procrastinators and people of marginal interest in the class, then "telling all" probably isn't a good idea. (It may be necessary, for instance, to announce yearbook deadlines that are several weeks ahead of the real ones the company has set up.)
- C. Frequent evaluations and guidance let staffers know where they stand and what they have to be working on.
- D. Grades must be fair and clearly explained but should not be inflated. Many students in good journalism programs are quite grade-conscious.
- E. It's important that procedures be set up to protect staffers from each other. (Example: one student doesn't do his work so another pupil gets stuck with this work at the last minute.)
- F. Be careful not to overload students with class-related work when this overload can be easily avoided without problems to the publications or the program.

IX. The publications
- A. Must earn respect. Do that by:
  1. Being substantive
  2. Being accurate and fair
  3. Providing full coverage, not regularly emphasizing certain people and de-emphasizing or omitting others
  4. Meeting needs of readers
  5. Coming out on schedule all the time
- B. Offset papers are the most professional looking and are something to shoot for, but mimeographed or xeroxed papers can meet all of the above criteria, too.
- C. Concept to consider in some situations: bulk mailing the school newspaper to all boxholders in the district

X. Money
- A. Money is power. The program must have adequate funding. It's good to have more than just "adequate funding", though, to be able to buy additional equipment and supplies, provide quality staff perks, etc.
- B. Sources of funds:
  1. Circulation
  2. Advertising
  3. Subsidies (It appears the necessity for these will increase in the future, particularly as regards yearbooks.)
  4. Fundraisers

XI. Flexibility is perhaps the most necessary requirement. Be prepared to adjust approaches, formats, frequency of publication and other concerns as needed to fit circumstances.

A final note: The publications course ideally should be a year-long one. Students should not be permitted to drop at semester. Also, it's best not to add totally untrained students at mid-year.